

CONFIDENTIAL

MR. SANDERS

IRISH AFFAIRS

We need to send advice for the Prime Minister about the response to the Southern Irish MPs' request to see her about Bobby Sands. In the course of Monday evening I have discussed this variously with Michael Alexander, Bernard Ingham, Roy Harrington and Neville Gaffin. I have agreed with Michael that we will not attempt to provide definitive advice until they have left Saudi, but we will try to have an informative telegram with advice awaiting them in Abu Dhabi.

The Prime Minister has a press conference in Saudi before she departs. At that point she will play this away for a few hours on the grounds that she has not had an opportunity to get completely up to date on that point.

The telegram seems to me to need to cover:

1. Details of the Irish MPs' request;
2. The NIO reading of the outcome of their visit to Sands;
3. A sitrep on Londonderry - and perhaps information about the unfortunate TV interview with David Mitchell carried by BBC on Monday night, who I am told was a victim of appalling editing.
4. The latest position over Dolours Price. (The Prime Minister has already agreed to Humphrey Atkins decision that she should now be released on medical grounds: the licence has been signed but specifies release within 15 days; the NIO hope that it may be possible to postpone this to Wednesday but that was still uncertain as I dictate text).

/ The recommendation

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

The recommendation will probably be against agreeing that anyone should see the Irish MPs. The basis of their permission to visit Sands was that they would attempt to persuade him of the futility of his hunger strike. The coverage of their press conference suggests that their request for a meeting is on the basis that they wish to press HMG to do what is possible while there is still time in hand. This is therefore beyond the understandings on which their visit to Sands was allowed. The NIO take this view. Michael shares it on the basis of information available to him on Monday night, and if the Prime Minister is pressed at all on Northern Ireland she is likely to follow that line, making it clear that the Government's general position on the hunger strike has been made abundantly clear.

There is, however, <sup>the</sup> question of how to say 'no'. Is it just a written response or is it done through HM Ambassador in Dublin, or through the Irish Ambassador in London. We must consider the possibility that some might feel that we should offer some kind of meeting. Michael's view is that if any Minister were to be involved, it ought to be a junior NIO man. The NIO are clearly determined to avoid this. I have some doubts as to whether an NIO Minister is the right man to deal direct with Dublin Parliamentarians - the visit to Sands was fixed up jointly with FCO and NIO assistance.

Roy Harrington is aware of all the above. He will have his people aiming to provide you with a draft of a telegram giving both background and advice so that you can get something off by midday. You will also want to bring in the FCO, to see if they want to give Dublin a chance to comment, given that there may be Taoiseach angles on all this.

I suppose you should also clear lines with the Home Office, although the Northern Ireland Secretary spoke to the Home Secretary yesterday, and I gather that the Home Secretary wishes to keep as far out of this as possible.

/ I hope

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

I hope all the above makes sense. You might want to have a word with me to elucidate whatever I have missed out or garbled.

I agreed with all concerned that for Monday night we should simply confirm that the request has been received, and that it would be conveyed to the Prime Minister. I gather that the Press Office were giving some gentle steering towards the idea that it would be diverted to an NIO Minister earlier in the day. I don't know what the source of this was. The Press Office seem to have got themselves into a tangle on Monday night. I spoke to Neville Gaffin late in the evening, having been told by him that he had resumed matters from Liz some hours earlier. Ten minutes later I spoke to Bernard, in Riyadh, just as he completed a telephone conversation with Liz who told Bernard that she was still firmly in command of all this. No comment.

M. A. PATTISON

20 April 1981

CONFIDENTIAL